



SEQUOIA & KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARKS

& SEQUOIA NATIONAL FOREST/GIANT SEQUOIA NATIONAL MONUMENT

FALL 2009 GUIDE



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Fall in the foothills: An end to waiting

High in the Sierra, fall prompts living things to start the long wait beneath winter snow. In the foothills, autumn signals an end to waiting.

Life here has waited all summer. Drought, heat, and the resulting food shortages provoked many species to go dormant. Many plants grew little or not at all. Some animals slept through the season – the summer version of hibernating.

With fall, however, reanimation begins. By late October, Pacific storms usually start to swing through the Sierra. They bestow the mantle of high-country snow that puts so much of life on hold. On the lower elevations, however, the storms confer growth-starting rain.

Along with cooler temperatures, rain inspires activity. Male tarantulas emerge from burrows to rove the landscape for mates. Under rocks, dormant California newts stir. As fall passes, these charming orange salamanders walk about searching for water in which to mate and lay eggs.

Under buckeye trees, which shed their leaves months ago during summer's dry heat, their large brown seeds lie waiting. Once the rains begin, a strong root pushes through each hard husk. Buckeyes sprout by the millions.

As acorns ripen on foothill oaks, some animals begin caching them. Acorn woodpeckers work ceaselessly to store these nuts. Oak trees, fence posts, telephone poles, houses... any wooden surface may be drilled to hold acorns.

Scrub jays use strong beaks to dig holes and push acorns into the ground. Acorns not dug up again for food respond to the rains; by



Beautiful, raucous, hole-drilling, communal food-caching: The foothills acorn woodpecker is at its best in the fall. Photo ©Brent Russell Paull

spring, oak seedlings throughout the foothills will owe their start to forgetful jays.

Fall's acorn crop sustains other foothill species as well: bears, deer, band-tailed pigeons, ground squirrels, dusky-footed wood rats, and raccoons.

The first rains jump-start the grasses. Native bunchgrasses, the few remaining in the foothills, sprout from roots that survive summer droughts. Annual grasses sprout from plentiful seeds.

Evergreen plants, such as live oaks and chaparral shrubs, also respond to rain quickly. Breaking dormancy, they start to grow again.

These food sources, plus cooler temperatures, welcome back species that migrated away from the foothills at summer's start. The species diversity that the foothills boast is especially evident in fall. Cedar waxwings, white-crowned sparrows, and others return from northern breeding grounds where cold and food shortages now rule. Red-breasted nuthatches and golden-crowned kinglets fly down from conifer forests. Mountain quail walk down; these nine-inch-long birds migrate up to twenty miles on foot.

The exception to this burgeoning vitality? The reptiles. Although it rarely snows, the foothills do know frost, which drives snakes and lizards to

their burrows.

Autumn also gives the foothills back to people for easier enjoyment. The midday sun has lost its harsh summer glare. Cool nights are not yet frosty. Occasional rains feel great in a land of drought. Open trails, plentiful wildlife, and less-crowded campgrounds beckon. Days are quiet, but life here is not in retreat — its wait is over.